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ABSTRACT

One in a series of booklets on instructional units for gifted students, the document centers on drama for high school students. Objectives of the interdisciplinary course include increased awareness of the dramatist's role in society and greater sensitivity to the creative process. An introductory section examines the major differences between Greek classical theatre and the modern theatre, giving examples from the writings of Ibsen, Chekhov, Miller, and O'Neill, Twenty-five suggested activities are presented, includng analysis of the influence on drama of the ideas of Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud; the nationalistic theatre movement; the role of the hero in modern drama; symbolism in Chekhov's writings; Ibsen's writings about the rights of women; and philosophical concepts about the meaning of life as reflected in the work of John Millington Synge, Chekov, O'Neill, and Thornton Wilder. (CL)

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BUCKS COUNTY INTERMEDIATE UNIT #22

Programs for Gifted Students

REALISTIC DRAMA: MODERN MAN'S SEARCH FOR SIGNIFICANCE

(A High School Curriculum Unit for the Gifted Students)

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No, no. I have lost my faith in the vine-leaves. But beautifully nevertheless! For once in a way! Good-bye! You must go now—and do not come here any more.

Henrik Ibsen

Oh, dear sisters, our life is not ended yet. We shall live. The music is so gay and joyful, and it seems as though a little more and we shall know what we are living for, why we are suffering...If we only knew--if we only knew!

Anton Chekhov

For a second you see--and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason!

Eugene O'Neill

For nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura--and so good-bye.

Tennessee Williams

CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

1. The primary purpose in studying the theatre is to expose students to an art form, which is interdisciplinary and is concerned with examining the nature of man in the context of a society's culture and values.
2. The class is designed to facilitate discussion and dialogue through an atmosphere which encourages students to express their opinions and to accept, tolerate or challenge the viewpoints of others.
3. The role of the teacher is to act as a guide through a variety of classroom experiences in order to help the students fulfill their unique capabilities.
4. Discussion and classwork will be based on a wide spectrum of assignments. To assure rational examination of topics, students will be required to prepare by utilizing the multi-media classroom and library resources available.
5. Lectures will occasionally be presented to the class to supply background information or supplement the resources available to students.
6. Outside speakers will be invited to share their ideas to the class. Out-of-class experiences will be provided as a means of enriching classroom activities and objectives.
7. Grading will be based on essay exams and other testing techniques, when appropriate; quality of research; care and promptness with regard to assignments; and degree of student participation.
8. Students will be encouraged to participate in dramatic activities and to observe the many forms of theatrical expression.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE

The students in a gifted program have the ability to use higher level thinking skills. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of theatre will enable these students to:

1. Become more aware of man as a human being, the development of his ideas through successive periods in history, the influences which led to these ideas, his cultural creations both artistic and intellectual which were inspired by his ideals.
2. Become more cognizant of the dramatist's role in society.
3. Become more sensitive to the creative process.
4. Become more appreciative and aesthetically aware of different art forms.
5. Become familiar with the relationship of drama and theatre to the morals, ideals, and values of particular cultures and societies.
6. Recognize the various technical forms playwrights use in order to communicate a variety of emotions and concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Modern man, just as the Greeks did, has turned to drama for a framework to examine the significance of truth, beauty, and freedom. The tumultuous nature of the modern world in the twentieth century has made life more complex and perhaps even more ambiguous, but as observed by Walter Lippmann:

> Philosophies...are the very soul of the philosopher projected, and to the discerning critic may tell more about him than he knows himself. In this sense the man's philosophy is his autobiography; you may read it in the story of his conflict with life.

As a result, the plays of the modern theatre utilize many styles and techniques as the playwright examines his world while developing an individual response. Perhaps this is the major difference between the classical theatre of the Greeks and the modern theatre. The tragic heroes of the modern world are no longer the superhumans challenging their fate and the gods in search of wisdom and truth; they are not the characters of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; instead, the modern hero is now the common man, the next-door neighbor. The characters of Ibsen, Chekhov, Miller, O'Neill, and Williams are struggling to survive in a lonely world. First, the eighty-seven-year-old servant, who has been left in the deserted house in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard remarks as the curtain falls:

> Life has slipped by as though I hadn't lived. I'll lie down a bit....There's no strength in you, nothing left you--all gone! Ech! I'm good for nothing.

For modern man, perhaps life is nothing but moments of happiness and sadness; illusions and dreams; aspirations and frustrations; a tear, a smile, a laugh, a sigh, a kiss. Yet, he still asks the same questions in search of significance.

Diversity characterizes the modern drama of today; however, realism has been the pivotal force which has influenced it. The modern theatre began

with the works of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). These two playwrights, a Norwegian and a Russian, became the first spokesmen to employ the medium of drama to capture the plight of the common man. Ibsen was a vocal critic of society and employed his talent as a dramatist to advocate social reform:

> To write - is to summon one's self, and play the judge's part.

Chekhov, on the other hand, focused on the inner development of his characters. His plays were not concerned with monumental events but with the essence of humanity. As critic, John Gassnu observed:

> All his work is an emanation of a personality so simple, so humane, and honest that a biographer would be stumped if he tried to exploit it in the market place.

What these two men began, a moving, forceful drama which dealt with the intricacies of life in a puzzling, changing world, others have continued. For example, turning to the American drama, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) won critical acclaim by receiving three Pulitzer Prizes and has been the only American playwright to be honored with a Nobel Prize. The son of an actor, he was knowledgeable about the theatre, but even more importantly his plays emerged from his own experiences and his sensitive feeling for humanity. He revealed this in the dedication of Long Day's Journey Into Night, "For Carlotta, on our 12th Wedding Anniversary":

> I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play - write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones.

What emerges, then, is a consistent pattern, a personal concern for humanity, a questioning of values, a search for man's significance in a world of complexity, and pondering of the ageless concepts of truth,

beauty, and freedom.

In order to understand this unique relationship between the theatre and society, gifted sutdents need to examine the theatre in the context of its culture. Students need to go beyond the playscript and study the philosophy, history, art, music, and literature. They need to utilize this information to speculate about the performance of a play and the bond which is created between the actor and the audience. As students develop an appreciation of a particular period in theatre, they need to evaluate humanity as it is portrayed and then project it to the world they know. Students need to think, read, question, and create in order to gain a greater understanding of man and his world.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Arthur Miller in "Tragedy and the Common Man" redefines modern tragedy and the tragic hero. Read this essay and compare it with Aristotle's criteria for classical Greek tragedy.
2. Frequently, modern playwrights draw upon their own lives for dramatic materials. Both Eugene O'Neill in Long Day's Journey Into Night and Tennessee Williams in The Glass Menagerie have written plays which are autobiographical. Read the plays. How has each playwright depicted the turmoil and psychological stress between himself and his family? How did each playwright discover the truth about his own life?
3. The establishment of the nineteenth century was challenged by revolutionary theories. Investigate the ideas of Marx, John Stuart Mill, Darwin, Freud. Consider how these ideas influenced the new trends in drama, the focus on the common man, especially the work of Henrik Ibsen.
4. Investigate the nationalistic theatre movements which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, consider Andre Antoine and the Théâtre Libre in France, Constantin Stanislavski and Nemerovitch-Danchenko in Russia, William Yeats and Lady Gregory and the Irish National Theatre movement in Ireland, and J. T. Grein and the Independent Theatre movement in England.
5. My Life in Art by Constantin Stanislavski is an autobiography which defines his personal conception of the artist's role. What ideals did he believe in?
6. Willy Loman is Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman may exemplify what has happened to the hero in the modern world. Compare the character of

Willy Loman with one of Shakespeare's tragic heroes such as Macbeth and a Greek tragic hero such as Oedipus.

7. In his plays, Chekhov develops characters who long for a new life, a life of change. Yet, many of his characters are incapable of action; they talk but nothing happens. For Chekhov, the subconscious and psychological turmoil becomes important. How does he reveal this underlying turmoil in the actions and speech of such characters as Masha, Olga, and Irina in Three Sisters, or Uncle Vanya in Uncle Vanya?

8. Although Chekhov's plays are primarily realistic, he also incorporated symbolism to convey his message. The motif of the cherry orchard dominates The Cherry Orchard as does the seagull in The Sea Gull and Moscow in Three Sisters. How do these symbols enhance Chekhov's portrayal of man's aspirations? What actually happens to his characters? Do they ever discover the truth about their lives?

9. Collaboration is essential to create a work of art in the theatre. The playwright writes a play but the director and actors develop the script through performances. Chekhov's plays were not successful until they were presented by the Moscow Art Theatre. In My Life in Art Stanislavski describes this artistic collaboration that resulted first in the poignant moving production of The Sea Gull. Read his description of the planning and the final production. What does this reveal about the role of an artist?

10. Henrik Ibsen was an advocate of social reforms. His plays explored controversial subjects, for example, the position of women. In The Doll's House, Nora Helmar has been married for eight years, she has two children, she has been protected and kept ignorant of worldly affairs;

but Nora finally asserts herself. In Hedda Gabler, Hedda is a frustrated woman capable of manipulating and destroying others. How did Ibsen use these characters to enlighten his audiences about the rights of women? What was the actual status of women at this time?

11. The subconscious, the inner workings of the mind, is an integral element in the development of characters in modern drama. People don't always express their longings and fears verbally but frequently reveal them through their actions. Stanislavski realized this and advocated a new style of acting which he explains in An Actor Prepares based on the subconscious and inner feeling. Select a character from a modern drama and carefully develop a list of characteristics. Now consider the character's motivations, why does he act the way he does? Write his motivations as infinitives, for example, to love or to steal. Select a passage of dialogue, study it carefully, and explain what the character is experiencing subconsciously.

12. At the end of Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, Dr. Stockman declares "the strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone." Read Ibsen's play and consider Stockman's dilemma. Throughout history, individuals have been faced with making a decision according to their conscience or following popular opinion. Do you feel that scientists must consider personal ethics? Consider this problem in relationship to the development of the atomic and the current questions being voiced about atomic energy. What other issues confront modern scientists with the development of new technology?

13. Scientists are not the only individuals faced with agonizing decisions such as Dr. Stockman's in The Enemy of the People. John F. Kennedy

explored this topic in his Profiles in Courage. What personal conflicts faced these politicians?

14. Riders to the Sea by John Millington Synge is an example of a modern tragedy. Evaluate this play on the basis of Aristotle's criteria for tragedy. Compare the character of Maurya and her search for truth with that of Oedipus. How is each character reconciled to his fate?

15. James L. Christian in his Philosophy an Introduction to the Art of Wondering considers philosophical concepts which are explored in modern dramas. For example, read "Part 2: The Condition and the Odyssey" and compare these ideas with those in Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night or Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. Other plays that might be studied include O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon, Ibsen's The Wild Duck, and Chekhov's Three Sisters.

16. In his book, Christian also explores the concepts of laws versus conscience and ethics versus choices (section 5-2; 5-4). Read these and compare the ideas with An Enemy of the People.

17. In Part 8: Of Ultimate Concern, Christian presents philosophical concepts about the meaning of life. After reading and discussing this chapter, consider how this problem is explored in Synge's Riders to the Sea, Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, and Thornton Wilder's Our Town.

18. People often say that history repeats itself. Arthur Miller used the Salem witch trials in The Crucible as a parallel to the McCarthy hearings. How does the dramatist once again become a social critic? Compare the historical background of these events.

19. Performance is an essential part of drama. Have students select scenes

from the plays, read and present them to the class.

20. In modern theatre, the director is responsible for the overall concept of the production; he is the major coordinator. In the production of a play, everything relates and goes together to create a unified effect. Have each student select a play read in class and develop a directorial concept. They should discuss characterizations, major ideas, conflicts, and visual elements such as setting and costumes.

21. What is beauty? Read The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde, Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw, and Our Town by Thornton Wilder. Compare the standards of beauty which are presented. Relate these standards to the Center for the Humanities program, An Inquiry into Human Perception: The Nature of Beauty and Ugliness.

23. Modern scene designers have been influenced by artistic movements: realism, impressionism, expressionism. Research the designs of Jo Meilzener, Robert Edmond Jones, and Norman Bel Geddes. Consider how they have used an artistic style to illuminate a playscript?

24. Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape is an expressionistic drama. How has the playwright adapted the artistic principles of expressionism?

25. Read "Philosophy of Art" in Robert Wolf's About Philosophy and relate these aesthetic principles to drama. What is the function of drama? Is it an art form? How does drama reveal humanity?

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